

THE BEATITUDES

Matthew 5:1-12

A sermon given by Larry R. Hayward on February 2, 2020, the Fourth Sunday in Ordinary Time, at Westminster Presbyterian Church in Alexandria, Virginia.

When Jesus saw the crowds, he went up the mountain; and after he sat down, his disciples came to him. Then he began to speak, and taught them, saying:

“Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. “Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted. “Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth. “Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled. “Blessed are the merciful, for they will receive mercy. “Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God. “Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God. “Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness’ sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. “Blessed are you when people revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account. Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven, for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you.

A few weeks ago, a member of our church told me that the Beatitudes are the most meaningful part of the Bible for her to read. Her comments have led me to think about the Beatitudes over the past few weeks, specifically, what they mean to me, to us; their role in the life and teaching of Jesus; their place in the faith out of which they grow and which they in turn shape and form. While I was away at the Men’s Retreat last weekend I began to jot down what the Beatitudes mean to me, and my jotting soon became writing, then a rough draft for this sermon, always a pleasant gift when it more or less writes itself, especially a week in advance.

I.

On one level, the beatitudes are simply a wonderful *sanctuary* from divisions and discord in the world: familial, racial, political, religious, electoral, judicial, legislative, economic. When we hear the Beatitudes, they provide a moment of welcome *peace*.

‘Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

‘Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted.

‘Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth.

Who can hear these words and look at her neighbor and feel rancor? Even if nothing changes about the world from which we have come and to which we return after hearing these words, in the hearing of them, we experience at least a moment of respite, quiet, calm. We experience Sabbath. We are changed by the Beatitudes, even if the change is simply one deep, restful breathing.

‘Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God.

II.

A second way the Beatitudes come to us is different from the way of sanctuary. This second way is the way of *law*.

I am told that Luther viewed the Beatitudes as an impossible ideal that serves to remind us of our sin because we cannot achieve the standard they set. In his reading, these statements of blessing become “a moral bromide...[which] present an ‘if – then’” way of looking at the world and at faith: “*If you are ‘poor in spirit,’ then you will inherit the kingdom of heaven*”¹ says a legal understanding of the Beatitudes.

But at least in my experience, when the Beatitudes function as law for us, they become more a *yoke* than *freedom* from being yoked, more a *burden* than a *blessing*, more a rod by which we measure how much we *fall short* rather than how much we have *grown*. I for one do not need the Beatitudes to convince me that I have a dark and sinful side; I have plenty of first-hand experience with that reality. Thus, if the choice is between Beatitudes as Law and Beatitudes as Sanctuary, I choose Sanctuary, momentary as such might turn out to be.

III.

A third way in which the Beatitudes have come to us has a strong tradition in Christian history. This way interprets the Beatitudes as an *ethic*, a way we are to live as Christians, a way we are to be as Christians. In this understanding, the Beatitudes define being a Christian as living “in imitation of Christ,” as implied by the popular question and bracelet: “What Would Jesus Do?”

There is a lot of material in the Beatitudes that give this view legitimacy:

‘Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness...

‘Blessed are the merciful...

‘Blessed are the pure in heart...

‘Blessed are the peacemakers...

‘Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness’ sake...

‘Blessed are you when people revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account...

Clearly, if we take the Beatitudes as the most specific and concrete statement in the New Testament of what it means to live the way Jesus lived, then we naturally draw *specific ethical stances and actions* by which in almost all circumstances we seek to live and act if we call ourselves Christian. If we follow the Beatitudes as an ethic, we choose

- Diplomacy over warfare
- Mercy over justice that is punitive

¹ Cynthia Campbell, Paper on Matthew 5:1-2 at the Moveable Feast Preaching Seminar, January 2020. The quotes extensively from Jonathan T. Pennington, *The Sermon on the Mount and Human Flourishing: A Theological Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2017), 14.

- Forgiveness over retribution
- Benefit of the doubt over rush to judgment.

If we are “Beatitude Christians,” we emphasize

- Empathy over enterprise
- Compassion over ambition
- Pain over pleasure
- Sacrifice over success
- Suffering over self-indulgence.

So deep is this *ethic* embedded in the Beatitudes that many people over time do not feel they can join a church or serve as an officer, for they have in their lives taken up arms, persecuted suspected criminals, laid people off at work, made decisions which brought themselves gain but harmed others. It is indeed a challenge to read the Beatitudes from a position of affluence in which most of us live without feeling that the community which seeks to live by them is a community in which we would neither fit nor be accepted. Even though most of us acknowledge that it is impossible always to live without compromise in a fallen world, that knowledge doesn’t deter a good number of Christians from seeking to “do what Jesus would do,” often at great harm to themselves or their families.

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In 1718, Quaker Benjamin Lay, a hobbled young man barely four feet tall, sailed to Barbados and witnessed first-hand the human cruelty of slavery. He came back convinced that “everything about this arrangement was an offense against God...” In 1732, he and his hobbled wife joined William Penn’s Holy Experiment, a Quaker community in Philadelphia.

Six years later after his wife’s death, he dramatically denounced the slaveholders in the society and became a hermit, living in a cave outside a hill, holed up with his 200 books, living off milk and water, roasted turnips and honey. He kept bees and made his own clothes.

In 1758, when the Quakers formally denounced slavery, and Benjamin Lay was told, he said, “I can now die in peace,” closed his eyes, and expired.

Benjamin Franklin’s sister had Lay’s portrait hanging on the wall of her home. And after signing the Declaration of Independence, Philadelphia surgeon Benjamin Rush said of Lay: “Some...seeds produce their fruits in a short time, but the most valuable of them, like the venerable oak, are centuries in growing.”²

Benjamin Lay was a Beatitude Christian.

² “The Story of Benjamin Lay,” from Jill Lepore, *These Truths: A History of the United States* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2018), pages 72-76.

IV.

In all honesty I know that I am not a Benjamin Lay. I rarely ask the direct question: “What would Jesus do?” Rather, I take the Beatitudes to be a statement in the most beautiful and arresting language of the *way* of God’s reign – a reign that is coming toward us, that is *calling us into itself*, that is in the process of *remaking* the entire created order to *restore* it to the original beauty in which it was created. God’s reign has not yet fully arrived, yet as the Apostle Paul says: “The creation waits with eager longing for the revealing of the children of God.”³ We wait anticipating this reign – actively, prayerfully – and we live toward it as if it has already arrived.

As such, I believe the Beatitudes are *promissory*. They speak what is coming, but not yet fully arrived, calling us to live *toward* them, inspiring and empowering us to *embody* them in our time, in our day, in our way.

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One of the positive aspects of social media led my wife to share with me a video of our ten-month-old grandchild, trying to pull herself up to a chair in front of her, plopping back down, reaching for the chair again, plopping down again. After a few tries she decided to lay the stuffed animal in her hand down and reach again, stretching to learn to stand, stretching to learn to walk, stretching to learn to make her way in the world that lies before her. Each time she fell back she laughed and tried again.

That is what the Beatitudes are for us: the chair in front of us that we stretch to reach, knowing that whatever lies in our reaching and pulling ourselves up to it will be more interesting and fruitful than simply being content to lie on our back and play with the toy in our hand. So we stretch for the Beatitudes, not because they threaten to punish us if we don’t reach them by a certain date, but because they are coming toward us and we know our future lies with them.

- The Beatitudes are a promise neither false nor make-believe, neither broken nor unfulfilled.
- They are a promise made not in the heat of a political campaign but in the slow march to the tree of Calvary.
- They are a promise as real as the clouds, as tactile as the rain, as beautiful as the sunrise, as comforting as the sunset, as firm as the floor of the forest on which we pitch our tent to sleep for the night.

The Beatitudes come to us, and we are drawn to them.

- They do provide sanctuary.
- They do remind us – once again – that we have not travelled fully down the road they unfurl before us.
- They do present what “Jesus would do” and perhaps what one day we will do.

But more than anything else they are “what is and what was and what is to come,” already sown among us as seed by the one who is “Alpha and Omega...who is and who was and who is to come.”⁴

Amen.

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³ Romans 8:19.

⁴ Revelation 1:8.